

Disciples Do Not Judge

Luke 18:9-14

Rev. Dexter Kearny

Longview Presbyterian Church

October 27, 2019

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us begin with a word of prayer. Dear God, I am so thankful that I am not like this Pharisee, pious and self-righteous, thinking more highly of himself than he should. I go to church on Sundays and volunteer at regular intervals. Amen.

(Pretend to go sit down)

It is so easy to read this parable from Jesus and then fall right into the same pattern as the Pharisee, judging others in order to lift ourselves up. We take the dichotomy that the Pharisee uses of who is in and who is out and simply shift the lines and then reuse that prayer once again creating a line that puts us in and others out! It is so easy to misuse this parable and fall into the trap of playing judge.

To me it is interesting to note that what the Pharisee says is technically true. The Pharisee has intentionally set himself apart from others. He does fast regularly and he tithes. In many ways he is a righteous person according to the law that he was trying to follow so passionately. But he misses the mark of how to be justified, or alternately translated made righteous. The Pharisee is relying completely on

himself and in his works, and is therefore tempted to judge the world between those who he sees as righteous and those who he sees as sinners. But this parable is not about the Pharisee, it is about the one true source of life, God.

The tax collector, on the other hand, really is a pretty bad person. He has been recruited by the foreign government to take taxes from his people and the only way to make a living doing that is to charge more than is necessary. In many ways a tax collector is a traitor to his people and is regularly lumped in with sinners in all the gospels. But it is exactly the fact that he is so aware of his sinfulness that he recognizes his desperate need for God. He has done nothing of merit. He has offended people and God. He does not even really repent or promise to do better in the future.

The tax collector is desperate. He does not have time to look around and divide humanity into ins and outs. He is simply overwhelmed by his plight. All he recognizes is his own great need for God's grace and forgiveness. But once again, this parable is not calling us to draw a line between humble people and self-righteous people, becoming judge again. The parable is not about the tax collector, it is about the one true source of life, God.

And this is what makes this parable so tricky. It is not about who is righteous or who is humble. It is not about a pious Pharisee or a desperate tax collector. It is not about creating a dividing line between the good and the bad, the clean or the unclean, the worthy or the unworthy. This parable is about God and God alone. God who alone can judge our human hearts. God who alone determines to justify, to make righteous, the ungodly and the undeserving.

This parable is not about judging others. It is a parable about God's grace and mercy. It provides a mirror so that we can honestly look at ourselves, not others. Instead of judging someone else, take a hard look at yourself and your relationship with God. Are you turning to God for help and justification? Or are you judging others and using them as stepping stools for your own self-righteousness? This is a chance to stop the comparison game, to stop judging others, and simply ask for God's mercy.

Because one thing that is so evidently clear in the Bible is God's goodness and God's mercy. Over and over again, God reaches out to the most sinful, the least deserving, the enemies of righteousness in order to prove just how merciful

God is. Our God does not care how we stack up against our neighbor or who acts the most righteous or the most humble. God cares specifically about you. Yes, you! Do not look around to judge your neighbors to make yourself feel better. Look at yourself and then look at God and say “God, I need your mercy and help and love.” And in this way you will go home justified.

Now, my friend, Martin, had spent years and years trying to do the right thing. Trying to feel good enough about himself. Trying to earn his right to exist. Trying to be perfect. He would go to the pub and debate with his friends about how much is needed to get to heaven and how to know if you had ever done enough. He would complain to his mentor continuously, trying to remember all the things he had done wrong or imperfectly, hoping that by getting it all out that somehow he would be absolved.

But it seemed that no matter how much Martin did, it was never enough. He always felt his shortcomings were too much to overcome. Until one day, Martin read a passage of scripture that changed his outlook forever. He read from Paul’s letter to the Romans in chapter 3 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...” (Romans 3:23-24) It clicked for the first time that righteousness was not his job, that perfection was not his job, that judging himself or others was not his job. Instead, God offers redemption as a free gift, unearned and unmerited.

Martin now understood the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. He knew that he was not to judge himself or others. It was only through the grace of God that any of us have a chance at abundant life. This Martin is one and the same as our Martin Luther, the starter of the Reformation. It is on this essential tenant that he began his work: God alone is the author of life and it is only through that author that we can receive it. There is nothing we can do to earn it. It is a free gift of grace to each and every one of us.

So stop judging your neighbors. Stop comparing your deeds to theirs. Stop having contempt for another. And rather start turning to the God of grace, the God of mercy, the God who loves you unconditionally. Because it is only in that loving embrace that we that we will ever find life to the fullest.